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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 SANTO DOMINGO 004689

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS II #2: OFFICIAL PASSPORTS, INC
- THE SCANDAL SPREADS

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 4653

(SBU) 1. This is the second in a series of political reporting on the second year of the administration of Dominican president Leonel Fernandez.

OFFICIAL PASSPORTS, INC - THE SCANDAL SPREADS

(U) The scandal involving hundreds of official passports issued to false city councilmen and phony dependents is reaching uncomfortably close to senior government levels. Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso, Migration Director Carlos Amarante Baret, and Director of the Dominican Municipal League (LMD) Amable Aristy Castro have published declarations that they will require and assist a full investigation.

(U) Assistant Attorney General Frank Soto and his investigators have so far interrogated more than 50 persons and issued arrest orders for 35, of whom 7 remain in custody. Most of the rest are free on bail. The Foreign Ministry quickly delivered to the AG's office and to the U.S. Consulate the records of 800 official passports delivered to municipal employees, going back to 1983, when President Jorge Salvador Blanco authorized the practice. The Assistant AG's staff has found evidence of some 90 false city councilmen. Issuances picked up in the past four years, especially for family members, many of them fraudulent. The black market price for an official passport has varied from 160,000 to 250,000 Dominican pesos (USD 4900 - 7700). The combative District Attorney of Santo Domingo, Juan Hernandez Peguero, has announced his intention to examine records in the more than 160 civil registry offices nationwide, directly challenging the National Electoral Board, which has sole authority over the registrars.

(SBU) Deputy Director of Migration Vctor Soto went through nine hours of interrogation and spent the night of October 12 in jail. He was grilled about facilitating airplane tickets for a group of 50 from Azua who emigrated illegally using the false passports. Soto was released the next day on his own recognizance and the AAG called Soto's action "a human error" of helping a friend buy airplane tickets for the group. But for now Soto remains suspended both from his official post and from the Central Committee of the ruling PLD. Two subordinate Migration officials are suspended for their role in facilitating airport formalities for persons bearing the false documents.

(SBU) The Dominican Municipal League (LMD), the organization that passes central government funds to city governments for most of their operating revenues, published a statement by its controversial and politically ambitious secretary general Amable Aristy Castro, pledging cooperation with the investigation. Aristy announced that 39 persons on a list of 72 suspect city councilmen sent by the AG's office were not on the LMD's rolls and were presumed to be false. Some commentators discounted these forthcoming gestures by "Mr. Moneybags on the municipal corruption circuit." Aristy is a former speaker of the lower house of Congress who aspires to run for President from the opposition PRSC in 2008; his daughter is the successful mayor of the eastern city of Higüey. LMD Technical Sub-secretary Amaury Guzmán was one of those arrested and charged for collusion with the city councilmen.

(SBU) At least one senior official has defied investigators and engaged in a test of wills with the district attorney. Central Election Board (JCE) president Luis Arias, whose court controls not only the national election machinery but also the civil registry offices and issuance of identity documents, has so far refused to allow government prosecutors access to any of the registry offices or archives. Arias cited a law dating from before the JCE had jurisdiction over the registry.

(U) In another indication of disarray in the registries, a majority of the nine JCE judges voted October 13 to remove from office whistle-blowing registrar Luis Felipe Rodríguez. Rodríguez had been running an efficient registry in the

twelfth district of Santo Domingo, and he had denounced to the press the widespread practice of other registry officials of pocketing fees for documents that by law should have been issued free of charge. The JCE said it had fired Rodriguez for "indiscipline" and "the needs of the service." Leaders of all three big political parties and civil society criticized the JCE for what they characterized as its hasty action in removing Rodriguez.

(U) Civic groups, including Participacion Ciudadana (Citizens' Participation, which receives USAID funding), have studied the situation in the registries and are calling for reforms. The JCE has again announced plans, under development for years, to modernize and automate the civil registry. The issue will become acute as the Dominican Republic prepares for the May 2006 Congressional and municipal elections, in which citizens will need valid identification cards (cedulas) to vote. For now, the prevailing practice is that a notarized certificate from a registry is required for many government actions, including registering children for the new school year, but the document is valid for only three months.

(SBU) The stark truth is that as many as 20 percent of the Dominican population -- 1.8 million persons -- lack identity documents. The registry's inefficiencies, officials' arbitrary administration, and the lack of appeal were central points in the verdict of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights against the Dominican Republic brought on behalf of two Dominican children of Haitian ancestry. Commissioner of Justice Alejandro Moscoso, in charge of judicial reform, acknowledged to the press on October 17 that the civil registries "have been rife with disorder and corruption for many years -- they're a real chaos."

(U) El Caribe portrayed the realities in its October 17 editorial:

"Being a civil registrar in this country is one of the most prized aspirations of many petty politicians who don't qualify to be legislators, senators, or city councilmen. They work in tiny offices with standing room for two or three persons and suffer the heat and body odor of a growing mass of people who seek personal documents. They earn meager salaries, which leads one to ask: Why would anyone want to be a registrar? Not for the salary; for the income.

"The civil registries charge extraordinary fees for almost all services, which should be subject to fixed fees or be provided gratis. Those funds don't go to the National Treasury, but into the pockets of civil officials who, in some cases, share the income with their political protectors.

"It is sad to see long lines of poor and very poor people standing in the rain or under the hot sun, waiting for a semi-literate employee or secretary to try to locate a birth or marriage certificate or verify data in the records.

"No government since Trujillo has been concerned about eliminating this indignity, which makes it hard to be a Dominican citizen. In other words, none of the parties that has ruled the country has had any interest in resolving the problem."

(U) 2. Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.

(U) 3. This piece and others in our series can be consulted at our SIPRNET web site, <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodmingo> along with extensive other material.

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